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Book Reviews

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Review of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe (Duke University Press)

Dana Horton

ABSTRACT Christina Sharpe's "In the Wake: On Blackness and Being" addresses issues of citizenship, racial violence, and black mortality, meshing her personal experiences surrounding death and "the wake" with a sharp critique of cultural structures, as well as a reimagining of slavery, funeral, and death metaphors. In the wake of so many "ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people," Sharpe's argument that black death is a foundational aspect of American citizenship encourages readers to acknowledge the antiblackness embedded in the past, present, and future of American (and by extension, Transatlantic) democracy (7). With the continued and encouraged proliferation of black death in the global diaspora, Sharpe's study will, hopefully, usher in more woke scholarship that questions pervasive antiblackness.

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. By Christina Sharpe. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2016, 192 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8223-6294-4. US List: \$22.95.

On December 30, 2017, Erica Garner, a Black Lives Matter activist and daughter of Eric Garner, who was killed by police in Staten Island, New York, died of a heart attack at the young age of 27.¹ Garner's tragic and untimely death exemplifies the immense burden that being black in America has on African Americans. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* interrogates that burden by addressing issues of citizenship, racial violence, and black mortality. Sharpe's book meshes her personal experiences surrounding death and "the wake" with a sharp critique of cultural structures, as well as a reimagining of slavery, funeral, and death metaphors. In the wake of so many "ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people," Sharpe's argument that black death is a foundational aspect of American citizenship encourages readers to acknowledge the antiblackness embedded in the past, present, and future of American (and by extension, transatlantic) democracy (7).

Sharpe's methodology takes up the ideas of "the wake and wake work." Sharpe articulates "that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13–14). To perform "wake work" is to labor within the space of paradoxes surrounding black citizenship, identity, and civil rights. Sharpe examines writers such as Dionne Brand, Kamau Braithwaite, and M. NourbeSe Philip, who rhetorically and visually represent these paradoxes in their writing, and draws on scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Frank Wilderson to enhance her exploration of the embodied and material fragments that survived slavery's afterlives. The goal of Sharpe's project is not to find "political, juridical, or...philosophical answers" to the problem of black exclusion but to analyze how writers, artists, and musicians aesthetically depict slavery's ubiquitous and contradictory presence in transatlantic spaces (14). Sharpe's unique methodology differs from many books on the


subject of black exclusion because her project “looks...to current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives...insistent black exclusion” and analyzes how cultural studies texts handle this phenomenon (14). Sharpe critiques the crossroads of many structures: material structures, such as slave ships and the contemporary impact of “the wake, the shop, the hold, and the weather;” public structures, such as sidewalks and other seemingly communal spaces where Trayvon Martin, and other black people, are unwelcomed; and institutional structures, such as academia, where black scholars are expected to adopt research methods that destroy their ontology.

Each chapter signifies a particular aspect of the slave ship and its contemporary impact on transatlantic blackness. Chapter One, “The Wake,” describes Sharpe’s methodology, as well as the family deaths that influenced her decision to partake in “wake work.” Chapter Two, “The Ship,” examines the genealogy of a slave ship, from the occupants on the ship to the construction of the ship to the remnants that the ship leaves behind. Sharpe features an image of a Haitian girl, after the Haiti earthquake, with the word “Ship” scrawled across her forehead, which Sharpe reads as indicative of being in the wake, where the girl is simultaneously alive and dead. Chapter Three, “The Hold,” draws an astute comparison between the hold of a slave ship, where slaves were tightly packed in small spaces, to prison structures that hold black bodies, ensuring that the prison replicates “the logics, architectural, and otherwise of the slave ship (in and across the global Black Diaspora)” (75). This chapter critiques images of the prison hold in the multiple global locations, from a prisoners’ sleep cell in Malawi to Oscar Grant’s cell phone photograph of his murderer, Johannes Mehserle, where Sharpe poignantly observes that positioning of the photograph places Grant in the hold and Mehserle as policing the hold. Chapter Four, “The Weather,” is the book’s conclusion, where Sharpe reads weather as “the totality of our environments...the total climate...and that climate is antiblack” (104). The climate of antiblackness, the stifling air and tainted water, is what leads to the never-ending list of black deaths. Sharpe complicates traditional conversations about weather by treating weather as an engulfing and inescapable state, rather than a singular event.

The book’s primary strength is Sharpe’s interdisciplinary approach towards revising the language associated with the afterlives of slavery. “Woke” is a word that has reemerged in contemporary spaces and refers to acts of social consciousness. It is a description of what happens after a person is awake and cognizant of social justice concerns. Sharpe’s discussion of “wake work” helped me understand the concept of wokeness better as well as reflect on what it means to adapt woke practices. A section of the book that I would have liked to see expanded upon was Chapter Three’s discussion of Barack Obama’s reactions to the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy and the death of fifteen-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, who sang at his second inauguration. Sharpe utilizes this example to demonstrate how Obama had “succumbed to the logic of the hold” through his acceptance of black death (97). Since Obama’s presidential reign perfectly exemplifies slavery’s afterlife, a longer discussion of the global impact of his presidency would make this book even stronger. Obama’s contentious relationship with several black leaders is, arguably, a result of his refusal to step outside of the confines of the hold.

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being engages with twenty-first century cultural issues through an exploration of race, gender, and violence. Sharpe’s poetic and accessible prose can serve as a model for anyone who wants to challenge traditional conventions of academic writing. This book is perfect for a graduate seminar about “The Black Atlantic” and complements texts by Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Frantz Fanon, and Claudia Rankine. With the continued and encouraged proliferation of black death in the global diaspora, Sharpe’s study will, hopefully, usher in more woke scholarship that questions pervasive antiblackness.

Notes

1. Vivian Wang, "Erica Garner, Activist and Daughter of Eric Garner, Dies at 27," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/nyregion/erica-garner-dead.html>. 

 Bio



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Dana Horton is an Assistant Professor of English at Mercy College. Dr. Horton earned her Ph.D. in English at Northeastern University and her B.A. in English and African-American Studies at Temple University. Dr. Horton's current book project, *12 Years a Slave-Master: Gender, Genre, and Race in Post-Neo-Slave Narratives*, examines representations of black and white female slave-owners in twenty-first century American literature, film, and music. Her areas of specialization include Black Atlantic Literature, Black Women Writers, Slave Narratives, Postcolonial Literature, and Feminist Theory. In her free time, Dr. Horton enjoys playing board games, collecting post office memorabilia, and complaining about the current season of *Scandal*.



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